Chapter 2
‘Trembling in Another’s Fulfilment’:
The Space of the Hutong and Its Significance to Mr. Yang

This chapter title might look strange, but I find no better way to reveal the situation that the Hutong residents are currently facing. To show the struggle which Hutong dwellers’ currently face, I decided to use this title for the first chapter. And this is also my main purpose of the chapter. Opposite the block where I was living in the Hutong area of Beijing, I found lots of walls were labelled by official planners with the following character ‘Chai’, which means to be demolished, removed or dismantled. This is a typical Chinese symbol with the white Chinese character of Chai (拆) in the centre surrounded by a white circle to show imminent demolition, as is shown on the wall in the picture above. What this symbol means to the Hutong resident can be clearly read from my informants’ responses: ‘Where shall we go if they demolish these yards? We have been here for many generations. How can they let us go in such an easy way? Firstly, we cannot afford to buy another apartment with the modest compensation; secondly, it is even hard for us to believe that we are being expelled or will have been expelled from houses inherited from our forefathers’. An informant of mine, Ms. Lin, tried to make their situation more clear and understandable to me by giving me a metaphor in the following way: ‘It is like owning an old album for a very long time; you put all your happy and unhappy emotional memories into it, but suddenly one day, someone comes to you and tells you, “I would like to buy this album from you for a non-negotiable price, because I want to have it and will put it to another use”. How ridiculous!’ But what is the point for the state or the local state government to conduct this process of displacement? One quick and strong answer might be, ‘the local state is urbanised in China’s great urban transformation’ (Hsing 2009: 10). To be more specific, ‘as land rents become one of the most important sources of local revenue and capital accumulation, local state leaders identify themselves as city promoters and devote themselves to boosting the property value. Property prices are used to measure the success of urban development, and are openly
referenced by local leaders as a primary political mandate. Mayors\textsuperscript{1} don suits and embark on road shows to promote real-estate projects in their cities, and compete with one another to hire advertising gurus for help in developing “urban strategic development plans” aimed at improving the image of their cities and boosting property values. City marketing and property value boosting are performed at both the ideological and political levels. High-profile urban project and property values are viewed as indicators of modernization, which in turn measure the political achievement of local state leaders\textsuperscript{2} (Hsing 2009: 9).

On the other hand, some house owners, most of whom have got houses in the inner city and somewhere else which has better conditions than their house located in this demolition site, are much more willing to hear the news of demolition, because they could get a large amount of money as compensation. Meanwhile, there is no need for them to worry about where to live. My landlady Mrs. Liu is one of these people. Mrs. Liu stays with her daughter, and her husband died many years ago. She has three houses sitting in different places in Beijing. One is located in a courtyard inside the second traffic ring in the city centre, which we were renting, and she inherited this house from her husband. One is located around the southwest of Beijing outside the sixth ring, which she is also renting out to others. Mrs. Liu told me she bought this high-rise apartment on her own. The other one is that which she is currently living in. This is even smaller than the one we rented. She told me the reason she stayed in the smallest one is because the surrounding area is under the process of demolition. If she doesn’t stay there, she will not get as much compensation as the others. Because the rebuilding committee would assume she has at least one other house in another place if they saw the house was empty or occupied by a tenant, she needs to stay within the house and wait as if she has nowhere else to stay. Also she told me, “This is a sensitive time, during which everyone is fighting for his or her own benefits. I should be there in person to get enough information about what is going on and take proper action to maximise my benefit. Everyone is like that’.

What is worth mentioning here is that Mrs. Liu is not an indigenous Beijinger and she migrated from a nearby province—Hebei.

\textsuperscript{1}Mayors in all the cities in China are elected through the People’s Congress, which is supposed to represent the majority common benefit.
2.1 Emotional Link with Land

To understand more thoroughly about how frustrated the Hutong residents are, who face or will be facing the displacement, it is better to know Chinese people’s relationship with land and soil, which, I would say, is intimate.

The most distinguished social scientist in China, Fei Xiaotong has given a clear picture of the foundation of Chinese society which has been described in his most well-known book called From the Soil: The foundations of Chinese Society. ‘Chinese society is fundamentally rural. I say that it is fundamentally rural because its foundation is rural. Several variations have arisen from this foundation; but even so, these variations retain their rural character’ (Fei 1992: 37). The reason that China has been labelled as rural in Fei’s book owes to China’s large proportion of agricultural land and population. In situations where peasants move to the city from the countryside where they were once majority citizens, they are now looked down upon as minorities. This has also been mentioned in Fei’s work: ‘We often say that country people are figuratively as well as literally “soiled” (tuqi). Although this label may seem disrespectful, the character meaning “soil” (tu) is appropriately used here’ (Fei 1992: 37). Fei first published his argument in 1947, which is 63 years ago. But what he described is still a truth, even now. I cannot forget it was on 3 August 2009 I moved into No. 7 Xinfu East Street, when we, which means my mother and I, started our first long deep conversation with my next-door neighbour, Mr. Yang. We were cleaning the kitchen and trying to use the steel frame in the courtyard to make a dinner table. After a while, Mr. Yang came out from his house.

Mr. Yang said: ‘Hello, is everything settled?’

My mother replied: ‘Yes pretty much’.

‘What is your family name?’ Mr. Yang asked.

‘Zhao. I must be older than you. What do you think? I was born in 1953. How about you?’ my mother replied.

‘Yes, I am three years younger than you. I was born in 1956. So I will call you Zhao Jie (which means Elder Sister Zhao), and you can call me Yang Di,’ Mr. Yang replied.

2 Usually, in Chinese culture it is not very polite to ask the first name of the person you talk to, who might be older than you.

3 It is not rude to ask people’s age in this situation, because knowing the age is the only way to find out how to address each other.

4 This term means Younger Brother Yang. In China, it is more respectful to ask people’s family name instead of first name, when they are becoming acquainted especially on their first meeting. The family name indicates which family you come from, which is more general and less private compared with the first name. I got to know Mr. Yang’s first name 3 months after I settled here, because I didn’t want to offend him by asking his first name directly. The chance I got to know his family name was when I was asking his telephone number, he wrote me down the number followed by his full name. For someone who is older, it is a courteous way to address him or her elder sister or brother, as the way, which shows the respect and intimacy to the elder party. Only if someone looks obviously younger, or of a similar age, for example, classmates, then that will be fine to ask what is your name. In Chinese culture, name in most cases refers to full name.
‘Wow! My daughter’s family name is the same as yours’.

‘Yo! What a coincidence!’ Mr. Yang was also surprised.

‘So may I call you Uncle Yang?’ I asked.

‘Certainly yes. Maybe we were family members a long time ago (laughing)’.

I also replied with a smile and nodded: ‘It could be. How long have you been staying here?’

Mr. Yang replied to me with a smile on his face: ‘I was born and raised up here, and I’ve lived here for 53 years. My son was also born here. Where are you from?’

My mother replied, ‘We are from Taiyuan, Shanxi province. It takes three hours by train to come to Beijing’.

‘I know Taiyuan. I have been there thirty years ago. I remember the train station, which is very nice. I am sure it is still there, right?’

‘Yes, of course’.

What surprised me was what Mr. Yang said next: ‘Taiyuan is a big city, the capital of Shanxi, if my memory is right. To tell you the truth, when you came here to look around the house and meet the landlady, I already figured out that you two are not common persons. You must come from a big place. I can tell from the way you dress, the manner you talk, your skin colour and also your outlook that you must come from a big city. I have very sharp eyes to identify people’s background. I cannot be wrong. On the contrary, as you probably already noticed, people coming from rural area are always “士 Tu (Soil) 头 Tou (head) 士 Tu (Soil) 脑 Nao (Brain)”’.

Here ‘tutoutunao’ is a metaphor to show the typical image of rural people in China interacting with soil on the land for many generations and being rooted in the soil not only with their feet and legs but also their head and brain, as if smell of the soil spread upward, which makes them look a bit dull. Mr. Yang’s reply is a verification of what Fei has described.

When my mother heard about Mr. Yang’s reasoning, she replied with a shake of the head and said: ‘No, Taiyuan is not as big as Beijing. We don’t feel we have any big difference with people coming from another place’.

After hearing this reply, Mr. Yang said: ‘No, no, how can that be the same? Of course, it is not the same. I am not flattering you but the difference is very obvious. Look at these people from rural places, they are very Tuqi (士气 soiled). When they go into the big city, they look like flies without heads (没头苍蝇 refers to people who don’t know where to go because of lack of knowledge. This expression also reveals an annoyed attitude towards rural people). They can’t find the way, don’t know how to use the Underground, have no idea how to operate the elevator and finally lose themselves among the skyscrapers. All their behaviours combined with

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5 This is an exclamation term in oral Beijing dialect, used to express the feeling of unexpected good surprise.

6 When someone is called uncle, brother or sister, it doesn’t necessarily mean they have kinship, again as this is a polite way to show your respect to the other party.

7 This statement is not a rude response of disagreement to the partner you talk to. In most cases, if someone gives you a positive comment, it is better to reply back with a negative response, as a way to show you’re modest. Otherwise, you will be judged as an arrogant person.
their tanned face colour, which is the result of long-term exposure to the sunshine, reflect their Tuqi (Soiled) feature that differentiates them from the city dwellers. In my case, as for me, I will also feel a bit lost, when I first come to a new place, but I have experienced a lot in metropolitan areas; therefore, I can use my transferrable knowledge to work out everything’. From the way Mr. Yang describes his view of rural people, it seems he cannot stand the ‘soiled’ countryman. He even gave me an example to show to what extent the rural people have been ‘soiled’: ‘When I was sent to the countryside to do labour during the Cultural Revolution, there was someone driving a car to the village I worked at. The villagers saw this vehicle and were all surprised by the moving “small house”. They gave the car a new name, “mobile house”. How funny! I then explained to them how it works. This is due to their lack of living experience in the city’, Mr. Yang told me.

Though what Mr. Yang said was trying to show how the peasants he met were ‘soiled’, this doesn’t prove that he hasn’t been ‘soiled’ at all himself. I see this not because I feel I am able to know him almost better than he knows himself; instead, I look at him in a different way from how he sees himself. On a sunny afternoon, 9 days after he delivered the ‘soiled’ concept to me (I remember it was half past three, when most of the inhabitants woke up from their mid-noon nap), Mr. Yang was standing outside the courtyard, just looking at people passing around and saying hello to these passers-by, whether man playing chess on the street corner, or children chasing after each other, for example. I went to Mr. Yang and started to talk to him. When I asked if he enjoyed living in the courtyard or the high-rise—as living in high-rise is a major modern trend—he replied to me:

‘Of course, I feel more comfortable to stay in the yard, because it is more like my place. All my sisters are now living in the high-rise. When I visit them, I cannot stay long in their place. Also, there are specific rules you need to obey around the high-rise. For instance, you should take off your shoes and put on sandals when you go in; if someone smokes, they should not flick ash onto the ground. But you can flick ash anytime anywhere on the ground as you wish, when you come to my place in the Hutong. The high-rise apartments are supposed to be much cleaner than my house, but I feel more at ease and can act at my will in my shabby room. On the other hand, when I stay in the high-rise building for a long time, I physically feel fidgety and have trouble to breathe’.

After hearing Mr. Yang’s statement, I felt that his description was a bit surprising; it made me want to inquire further, because I myself have never experienced this physical discomfort by shifting from courtyard to high-rise. So I asked him: ‘What makes you feel like that? Is there any specific reason?’ Mr. Yang’s reply brings out another new concept to me. He said:

‘Because the structure of the high-rise building lifts the residents’ dwelling ground up to mid-air, people cannot reach Diqi (地气, means spiritual energy from the land); therefore, these physical reactions come out’.

‘But what is Diqi?’ I asked.

‘Good question’, Mr. Yang said, ‘This is a concept coming from traditional Chinese medicine. If you sit on the train for a long time, you should walk around on the platform when it stops for a while. If you take the ship to somewhere far away,
you need to have a walk on some major quay. Similarly, you should go down to the ground to connect yourself with Diqi if you have stayed in the high-rise for a long time. In the theory of Chinese traditional medicine, a healthy person should balance his inside body by absorbing Tiandijinghua (天地精华), which means the essence or spirit of heaven and earth. In other words, a person should keep a balance of yin and yang (阴阳平衡) by properly connecting himself with nature including land, air, sunshine, etc. Diqi belongs to yin. If you live above the ground for a long time, you will lack yin, and yang will automatically outweigh yin, so the balance will be broken. Is that clear enough to you?

‘Of course, yes’, I said.

What’s more interesting is that when I tried to Google the concept of Diqi online, I found an article called ‘Connect with Diqi’ published on the website of the Communist Party of China (http://cpc.people.com.cn) which encourages all Communist Party members to connect with Diqi to keep them balanced. Here Diqi refers to the public or the people, who are seen as the grounds of the Communist Party. But this could still reveal how the concept Diqi is rooted in the minds of Chinese individuals.

Once when I took a bus somewhere, I heard the driver say to a passenger in a strong Beijing accent: ‘I have felt annoyed to be disconnected with Diqi after I moved to the high-rise’. That is why Fei emphasises again the ‘soiled’ feature in his work, and this argument becomes the foundation of his future research. ‘The Chinese are really inseparable from the soil. To be sure, out of this soil has grown a glorious history, but it is a history that was naturally limited by what could be taken from the soil…only those who make a living from the soil can understand the value of soil. City dwellers scorn country people for their closeness to the land; they treat them as if they were truly “soiled”. But to country people, the soil is the root of their lives…’ (Fei 1992: 38).

Even though Fei grew up in a non-rural family, he described his experiences in his book: ‘When I went abroad for the first time, my nanny slipped something wrapped in red paper into the bottom of my suitcase. Later, she told me in private that if I had trouble getting accustomed to my new home and if I were too homesick, I should make some soup from the stuff wrapped in the red paper. In the package was dirt that she had scraped from her stove. I remember seeing a similar custom in a movie called A Song to Remember, which took place in Poland, an Eastern European agricultural country. It made me realise even more what an important role the earth plays and should play in a civilization like ours’ (Fei 1992: 38).

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8 Yin and yang are the major concepts of Chinese traditional medicine and also of Fengshui. Yang stands for masculine, man, warm, hot, dry and parched; and on the opposite side, yin stands for feminine, woman, cold, cool, wet, sombre and shady. The characteristics of yin and yang could also be told from the characters in Chinese, which are 阴 (yin) and 阳 (yang). Apart from the similar left side, the right side shows the difference clearly, because the right-hand side of yin contains the character for moon (月), while Yang contains the sun character (日).


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However, what Mr. Yang claimed to me seems to go against Fei’s argument, in drawing a distinction between the rural and city people. Fei described the Chinese culture as if it was homogenous, while according to my informant Mr. Yang, the clear us-them division went along the lines of the rural-urban lifestyle or state of mind. But Mr. Yang probably has not realised that his everyday habits are also inseparable from the soil and a peasant mentality—as revealed by his comments on Diqi—even though he doesn’t do any farming.

Besides his physical needs of connecting with soil properly, Mr. Yang’s everyday life is also closely related to peasants and the countryside and is typically soiled. Traditionally, one of the major channels to sell goods was yaohe\(^{10}\) (hawk) while walking along the Hutong, and this hawking was heard by the courtyard dwellers. If they had a need, they would come out and look at what the retailers had. But this traditional way of selling has become less and less common, because more and more courtyards have disappeared and, as a result, the dwellers moved into the high-rise, where the sound of yaohe is not able to reach. But still some of the farmers living in the outskirts will go into the Hutong in the city and bring their farm products to sell. Mr. Yang really enjoys buying goods from itinerant salesmen because they are always fresher and cheaper than he gets from the market. One of the major reasons could possibly be that the retailer saves on both costs and the tax by selling in this mode, so the price could be lower than normal.

2.2 Emotional Links with the Items Grow Up from the Land Within One’s Living Area

Mr. Yang’s connection with land or soil, as reflected by his uncomfortable feelings at separation from the soil or land for a while, means not only a physical attachment but also an emotional one. I would argue that Mr. Yang’s story and life experiences, as well as his perceptions, are attached to particular physical sites built in the inner city of Beijing and also to the people who were born and grew up with him in these sites. In other words, Mr. Yang shows an attachment to what might be described as both abstract space\(^{11}\) and social space\(^{12}\).

The peasants are really fond of their land because the farmland provides for all their living needs, like vegetables, fruit, wheat, etc. The peasants undertake the whole agricultural process from seeding to irrigating to fertilising and through to

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\(^{10}\) It is written as 哗啣 in Chinese. Similar meaning to ‘hawk’. The retailers walk through different Hutong and hawk to tell the potential customers living in Hutong what they are selling and how good the quality is. How and what the hawk is like a commercial advertisement. The content, the inflection and the volume together make this hawk a piece of art. And now the hawk of Beijing Hutong have been recognised as one of the intangible culture heritages of China.

\(^{11}\) Abstract space refers to the second level of space as defined by Lefebvre (1991: 11). He also refers to it as the ‘mental level’.

\(^{12}\) Social space refers to the Lefebvre’s ‘social level’ (1991: 11).
harvest. They interweave their expectation and their efforts together with their whole memories of each plant’s distinct growing periods. Generally speaking, it is the produce grown up from the land which builds up the intimacy between the peasant and the land. Mr. Yang’s role to the land is equivalent to that of a peasant. He does expect harvest from the land he lives in, and in order to get the harvest, he makes his efforts accordingly and engages in seeding, irrigating and fertilizing. For instance, he built up a small kitchen in the public area of the courtyard, opposite his house for cooking, and also a shed to place his coal in winter with bricks and tarpaulin, which is similar to the seeding. If the windy season is coming, he reinforces the roof with bricks, which resembles the fertilising or irrigating stage under some special conditions. He even brought up his son in the house where he is living in a similar way to seeding, and in expecting him to grow up healthily by taking care of him by all means, it could be said he fertilises his son like a farmer does. Also his friendship with other people was built up on the land. He maintained and developed this through different ways. The visible (like the shed he built opposite his main house) and invisible (like the social relationship with other neighbours) items above the land were more or less like the fruit or vegetables growing from the farmland. Mr. Yang inputs his effort and expects outcomes from the land in different seasons.

Every time he cooked something special and which he is good at, for instance, beef dumpling, he brought it to my mother and me. This was one of his ways to maintain and develop our friendship, food exchanging. I remember one day, we woke up on a cold morning. My mother and I were trying to open the window to get in some fresh air from outside, but as the temperature was too low, the window had frozen and stuck. We tried to push it hard, hitting it with a hammer, while making a lot of noise, but it still didn’t work. When the noise was heard by Mr. Yang, he came to our house and asked what was happening. On learning of our problem, he went back home and came back in a few minutes bringing his screwdriver and another hammer with him and got the window opened in a minute. He was so warm-hearted to us, which I consider is the best fertiliser to our friendship.

When Mr. Yang heard that I was interested to know the traditional Beijing culture, he was very pleased to tell me that I came to the right person. He seemed to be proud of his roots and considered the fact that he was born in Beijing to be distinctive and giving him the true insider’s insight. He said: ‘I am an indigenous Beijinger and I know each corner of the inner city. To experience the culture of the inner city, we’d better use a bicycle. Only in this way, we can stop where we want. Let me know when you want to visit’.

I said, ‘Excellent! I will be free tomorrow. Will it work for you?’

Mr. Yang said happily, ‘Sure, I will tell your aunt\textsuperscript{13} to have lunch at the cafeteria in her Danwei\textsuperscript{14} (单位 means working unit or the institution one is working for).

\textsuperscript{13}Because I call him uncle, therefore his wife should be called aunt. This way of address is to show the respect and intimacy to Mr. Yang and his wife.

\textsuperscript{14}Danwei can be referred to as a special work unit in Chinese culture. It originated from Soviet inspiration, and its function could be the Maoist state monitoring the loyalty of employees to the Communist Party, but in a much more tender way. Therefore, Danwei is not merely the unit that enables the employee to get their payment to lead their life but also will provide their employee with some benefits, for example, Fuli Fen Fang, which means beneficial house. Through Fuli
So we will have enough time for visiting. Ask your mum to see if she would like to come with us’. While saying this, Mr. Yang walked in front of my room door and called my mum: ‘Zhao Jie, Qingqing would like me to show her around the historic site of inner Beijing, would you like to come with us? Will you be comfortable about her safety when she is with me?’ My mother said: ‘I have nothing to worry about to let her go with you’. It is customary to inquire about my safety, because of our different gender. By expressing his concerns and by inviting my mother to accompany us, he also made it clear that he did not have any romantic interest in me.

‘Great! Have you visited inner Beijing before? If you haven’t, we can go together. We have two bicycles, and I could borrow another one from Xiaojun, who is just living in the courtyard in front of us. Don’t worry about the traffic. Also I will tell my wife to have lunch in the cafeteria in her Danwei, so I will not need to come back to prepare her lunch, and we could have enough time. We don’t need any map. The whole map is in my mind. Sometimes I loiter alone with my bicycle, lots of fun’.

‘Ok, that will be nice. I am sorry for the inconvenience it brings to you’, my mother appreciated Mr. Yang’s hospitality.

The next day, in the early morning, we met up in the courtyard at 9.00 a.m.

‘Ok, the bicycle is ready. Xiaojun went to the Zaoshi with his bicycle (早市 means the early market) earlier than usual, so he could bring back the bicycle for us to use. I will pull down the seat for Qingqing to ride, because I used to ride this one, and the seat is a bit high for her I suppose’, Mr. Yang said to us with a satisfied smile on his face.

‘You are so kind. You should not forget your Uncle Yang, even when we are not staying here any longer’, my mother said to me.

‘Of course, I won’t. Shall we go?’ I asked.

‘Yes, let’s go. Firstly, we will go through X Street until we reach the entrance on the other side of the street, then we turn left and head towards west. There you can see the Carrefour supermarket, and we will keep on going along Guangqumennei Street. As long as we see the Ciqikou Tube station, we will turn north and keep on going until we see the signpost of Dongjiaominxiang’. When I was about to take out my notebook to write down what Mr. Yang told me, he laughed at me: ‘This route does not need to be written down in a notebook, for me, it is all here (he pointed to his head). There are many ways to go there. Only if you stay here for a long time, you will know the different routes to a certain place. Look, on our right-hand side is the Wumei supermarket, and if you go through the lane beside it, you will then reach the bathroom that we normally use. This supermarket is near the place where we live, but it is not a very big one, and the variety of goods is very limited. If I need Fenfang, you can have a house or apartment from your Danwei without paying for it. Also Xiaji Fuli, which means summer benefit, a compensation usually given for working in the hot season, normally including towels, soft drink, green tea, watermelon or sugar, etc., that could reduce the body temperature. In the winter, employees will get Kao Huo Fei, means warm-up fire fee, to allow them to buy some coal to keep the room warm. Meanwhile, Danwei also intervene in their employee’s everyday life, for instance, if the employee needs to get an introducing letter in order to get married at a registry office. The same letter is needed for a divorce as for a marriage. Some old TV shows indicate that when a couple quarrelled, one side might say to other side: ‘I will go and report this to your leader’.
salt or some simple stuff, I will go there for a quick buy. But if you want to get loads of stuff and don’t want to bother with going to many different places, I would recommend you Carrefour in Fangzhuang or Guangqumen. To get there, you can take bus Number 8, which will take you to Guangqumen Carrefour supermarket, and Number 60 from Beijing Amusement Park stop which is the starting point, from where you are guaranteed a seat.

‘Good to know’, I said.

‘If you stay longer you will know everything. It just takes some time. Don’t worry. Any time you need a guide, just let me know. I was born and raised here’. ‘Look’, Mr. Yang pointed to a courtyard that we just passed, ‘that is a typical courtyard, but now it is used as an office building by a company. If we keep on cycling along the previous street, you will see the Chongwenmen Market which was set up in 1976 and has been in use for 34 years. This is the oldest market, which is still functioning in Beijing. We are nearly there. Bicycle is the best way of transportation to travel within the inner city. If you drive a car, then you cannot stop wherever you want. The same happens when you use public transportation. So bicycle is my favourite way to travel. Sometimes when I have nothing to do and my wife and my son are both at work, I will travel on my own riding my bicycle. It is just as helpful when I am shopping at the market: the bicycle can be used as a carrier for heavy goods while I walk through different stalls and also a transportation tool to take me and my stuff back home easily’.

‘I agree. Bicycle is like our legs and feet’, I said, nodding my head.

‘Exactly! China has long been seen as a bicycle-dominant country’, Mr. Yang said.

After a short while, we arrived in Dongjiaominxiang Street, as the signpost jumped into our sight.
This is an area where all the different foreign embassies used to be located in the Qing Dynasty including some foreign banks and Western churches.

Mr. Yang told me: ‘This Hutong is the longest surviving one standing in Beijing. During the Cultural Revolution, the name of the street changed into Anti-imperialism Road to show the citizens’ loyalty to the Communist Party’.

‘That’s interesting! Do you think that was necessary?’ I asked.

‘No, I don’t see the point, why they bother to change the name when the substance of this street is still virtually the same. The whole Cultural Revolution was a total disaster, but it is also sad to me that certain factors stimulated all the citizens to get so enthusiastic and fond of Mao, from whom the craze came. Everyone was thinking in the same way and stepping in the same direction. Later on, after the Communist Party announced that the Cultural Revolution was a mistake, the name of the road was changed back. Thereafter, citizens gradually stopped following blindly. This is a very peaceful and beautiful street with a lot of Western-style architecture, the St. Michael’s Church, Yokohama Specie Bank, etc. (pointing to the buildings along the street). The Western architecture structure is really sturdy. Even though it has been standing for many years, it still looks very nice. Look at the style. It is so different from ours. What a wonderful road, with the trees flanking on both sides and forming the arch of shade for the passers-by in the hot summer! If I have to go anywhere in the hot summer, I will try to go through Dongjiaominxiang if possible to stay out of the heat for a short while’, Mr. Yang said.

‘This is what we say: “One generation plants the trees in whose shade another generation rests’”, I replied.

‘That is true. Passing this street, we will reach the Western Returned Students’ Association, which is located on a royal courtyard. This is what I want to show you, a real courtyard, known as siheyuan. The one we are living in is just a common yard which is far behind this one. But I am afraid they don’t allow us to get in. You can take some pictures outside. It will not be a problem, because we are now heading somewhere more exciting, the Forbidden City, the most impressive yard. We will keep on going along Nanheyan Street, and we will pass Nanchizi Street, then we turn left; you will see the east gate of Forbidden City named Donghuamen. Have you been to the Forbidden City before?’

‘Yes, I travelled here about 5 times when I was doing my bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Beijing between 2002 and 2008. In most cases, I showed my friends who were round coming from other places to Beijing for sightseeing’.

‘So you already know the name of the river’, Mr. Yang pointed to the river surrounded the Forbidden City and asked me.

‘Hmm, I can’t really remember what its name is exactly. I always call it City Guard River or Moat’.

‘Yes, the function of the river is to protect the Forbidden City and keep it from attack, but it actually has a name: it is traditionally known as Tongzi River’.

Mr. Yang is a very good tourist guide. Here Tongzi (筒子) means tube. ‘The Tongzi River is a canal; therefore, it goes very straight like a tube. That is why it received this name Tongzi River in the Qing Dynasty’.

‘I see. Would you like me to take a picture in front of the river?’ I asked.
‘I come here very often. It’s not necessary to take one this time. The main reason I am here is to show you around’, Mr. Yang said.

But I could read the potential meaning from his word which is that he didn’t want to bring us any trouble, not really that he didn’t want to take a photo. So I insisted asking him to stand beside the river, and he finally agreed. Even on the way as he walked to the river, he kept on saying what a trouble it was, and that I didn’t have to take pictures; in this way, he expressed his ‘unwillingness’, but in the picture, I can see his nice smile. In Chinese culture, it is customary to be outgoing and friendly and not expect an immediate reciprocal return. Since Mr. Yang perceived taking his picture as a favour to him, he may have felt embarrassed that we were doing him a favour, when it was his social obligation to serve as my guide.

On our way back, we were planning to buy a train ticket back to my hometown, but I had no idea where to go, because we could not book train tickets online beforehand, so we needed to go either to the train station or the train ticket agent. In most cases, we decide to go to the agent, though we need to spend another 50p booking charge, but the queue is normally shorter than at the station. Another major reason is that the railway companies want to cultivate the relation with the agents and thus introduce measures to protect the agents’ benefit: the train stations only release the tickets 3 days ahead of departing, while the agents get the tickets 10 days ahead. The problem is that all the agents are located quite randomly. I could not find their exact location online or anywhere else. So finding the nearest ticket agent is completely based on local knowledge. I told Mr. Yang about my concern and he said: ‘That is easy, along this road, you will find one, which is next to the sports equipment store. So you don’t bother going a roundabout way’.

The way that Mr. Yang describes how to get to somewhere is based on what he has experienced, which he has gained through his sight, hearing and body, instead of the map. Therefore, when he gave me directions on how to get somewhere, he uses the landmark he is familiar with together with the direction guide, like turn left, or right, go towards north or east. He never mentions getting onto a certain road, unless it is a big main road that he could use as a landmark.

To live in Beijing sometimes you have to gain some local knowledge, especially through someone who could help you to gain the knowledge. For instance, when I first moved to the courtyard, we did not have bathroom, and when I wanted to take a shower, I didn’t know where to go. Without Mr. Yang’s help, I would bring my shampoo and lotions, walking through street to street and trying to see if I was lucky enough to find one randomly. But when I told Mr. Yang my concerns, he walked my mother and me to the public shower room. Actually there were two shower rooms at the place he showed us. He again used his local knowledge to tell us that ‘the small one is 90P per person each time, while the larger one is £1 each, but it has a larger space inside and is much cleaner than the smaller one; therefore, I highly recommend you this one’. (At the time he told me this, I suddenly recalled the memory of buying a watermelon from a peasant who brought a whole truck of watermelons from the countryside to the city. When I was about to choose the melon, he told me the other one is much sweeter than the one I chose.)
What Mr. Yang’s descriptions reveal is that his whole sense of landscape is based on personal living experience rather than technology. He has linked his life with these sites. In my case, I was left with no choice but to trust in my map. The way I looked at these sites was more mechanical. If some parts of the site we visited changed, I wouldn’t be able to notice, but Mr. Yang would. He could always tell me how this changed place looked like before, what the relevant story was to this sight. All this information Mr. Yang provided to me, even in our era of information overload, could not be found on the Internet. His contact with the physical environment surrounding him is all based on personal interaction. He experienced the life of physical objects. What’s more, his personal emotional life interlocks with the physical space expanding outside his own house, which can be seen as a centre of ripples: the level of intensity of his emotional life links with the physical space and gradually decreases from the centre to the periphery.

2.3 Differentiated Familiarity (Chaxu Familiarity)

In 1984, Fei (1992) formulated the concept of chaxugeju, which can be translated as differential mode of association (Fei 1992: 19), to describe social relationships. Cha means ‘difference’ or ‘dissimilarity’, Xu means ‘order’ or ‘sequence’, and geju means ‘patterns’ or ‘framework’(Fei 1992: 14). In order to help us understand this concept thoroughly, he gave the following metaphor: ‘social relationship in China possesses a self-centred quality. Like the ripples formed from a stone thrown into a lake, each circle spreading out from the centre becomes more distant and at the same time more insignificant. With this pattern, we are faced with the basic characteristic of Chinese social structure, or what the Confucian school has called Renlun15 (human relationships). What is lun? To me, insofar as it is used to describe Chinese social relationships, the term itself signifies the ripple-like effect created from circles of relationship that spread out from the self, and this produces a pattern of discrete circles. In the ancient text shiming (means interpretation of names) lun is defined as “the order existing in ripples of water”’ (Fei 1992: 65). But the water ripple image that Fei has proposed to describe the Chinese social structure not only takes effect among individuals but also embodies the intimate relationship between the individual and physical space, which Lefebvre described as the ‘mental, including logical and formal abstractions’ (Lefebvre 1991: 11). I would like to call this ‘abstract space’. What makes the difference is that the centre of the ripple is not the individual himself, but rather, it is the physical object, which is highly related with the individual, and is in most cases their house. In Mr. Yang’s case, the centre is not Mr. Yang himself, but is ‘first door, No.7 X Street’. And his intimate relationship with the physical space decreases gradually as he goes further from the centre which is his house.

15 Ren (人) refers to people, human being.
On the day Mr. Yang showed me around Beijing, we went to Houhai which is 10.5 km away from where we lived, and I asked if he knew where there was a public bathroom. He told me: ‘Let’s ask someone living here’. Back in the area around X Street, he could easily locate the train ticket selling point that we were looking for. The closer the focus is upon Mr. Yang’s activity area, the more clearly intimate his connection is with his space. When someone comes to knock on his door, especially when he hears some unfamiliar steps approaching the door, he shouts from inside and asks: ‘Who is it?’ and meanwhile, he holds the absolute power of decision to let the person wait or come in straight away. His brick-built house is like a container of his own personal life and also serves as a territory definer of his rights, which is like the centre of the ripples. Within this area, every item is under his control, and everything is running at his will. This idea has also been embedded into his wife’s mind, who is also the owner of the house where they are currently living. Thus, under some circumstances, the two dominant centres will have a fight, where both of them have a strong sense that they should play the leading role. Thus, they quarrel sometimes. Because Mr. Yang and I were next-door neighbours and the wall is not thick enough to be soundproof in most cases, I could hear they are quarrelling, as I sat in my room. Mostly the row will last no longer than 15 minutes. However, I remember one of the shrillest fights which happened during my stay lasted about 1 hour, and I could even hear when he slapped his wife in the face. At the time, his son was trying to intervene between them and mediate. As a neighbour, we are supposed to come to their house and try to comfort both sides and mediate the issues. But my mother and I felt that it might make the couple embarrassed by our being present during their quarrel. But the next day, Mr. Yang came into our room and brought us some hot water. My mother asked him to sit a while for a cup of tea, and then we started to talk about what happened the previous night.

‘You quarrelled with Di Mei (弟妹) last night?’ my mother asked.

‘Did you hear that? I bet you must have done, unless you were out, because the wall between us is pretty thin. Even when your mobile phone rings, I can hear it from my room. I told my wife that all my entire face has been lost because of quarrelling with her. At the beginning Zhao Jie and Qingqing thought that I was such a knowledgeable and good person. This quarrelling completely ruined the good impression that I made to Zhao Jie and Qingqing. That is not good’, Mr. Yang said with an embarrassed smile.

‘Don’t worry about that. We will always keep your great characteristics in our mind. So what happened to you last night? Anything serious?’ my mother asked.17

‘Actually there is no big deal, only some trivial things. Yesterday evening, when we finished dinner, I was about to wash the dishes, because my wife always feels the cold in her hands, and I didn’t want to let her touch cold water. But she insisted that she wanted to wash up. So I no longer refused and let her do it. But after she washed

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16 Because my mother referred to Mr. Yang as Brother Yang, his wife is supposed to be younger sister-in-law, which in Chinese is Di Mei.

17 As I am a younger generation compared with Mr. Yang, I am not supposed to inquire into his domestic affair.
up, the whole floor was wet. I got a bit angry, so I started to blame her and question why she did not listen to me. She tried to fight back. And we finally ended up quarrelling. She is a person who doesn’t know how to do the right thing at the right time. When I get angry, whatever she does seems to try to drive me even angrier’, Mr. Yang complained.

‘Relax’, my mother said, ‘When I heard through the wall that you were arguing about something, I really struggled to decide whether I should come over to stop you or not. If I went to you, maybe you would feel that you were losing face, and would be angrier. But if I didn’t go, I was a bit anxious that you two might reach an unpleasant end and hurt each other. A couple should try to meet each other half way. The whole family will not get peace if you both return tit for tat. Running a family is very much like dancing, one party steps forward, the other should step back, only in this way, the whole family will be in a harmonious atmosphere. Your wife will be the only person who can accompany you until you are very old. Try to treasure what she has done for you. According to what you explained, I believe Di Mei (means brother’s wife) might have thought you were busy preparing for dinner, and she felt it would be courteous to wash up the dishes and let you have a proper rest. Don’t misunderstand her. Your temper is also like a fire, which is not good for your health’, my mother said.

‘I see what you mean. If you went into our place, I would not say anything anymore. I would give you a face.¹⁸ I know she meant to care for me. But her temper is really not good either. I will try to step back next time anyway. Sorry to make you laugh at us. My good image has been completely ruined in this way (laughing). This is not good. OK, I will listen to Zhao Jie and follow your teaching’, Mr. Yang replied with a smile while nodding his head to show his agreement, as if he was very sincere about it.

Through the quarrelling issue between him and his wife, it is self-evident that Mr. Yang thoroughly shows his connection with the third level of space, which I would like to define as ‘social space’ that Lefebvre described in the following ways:

Thirdly, the social, in other words, we are concerned with logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopia. (Lefebvre 1991: 11)

Mr. Yang never owed any apologies to us, because quarrelling with his wife is something domestic, which has nothing to do with any outsiders like me and my mother. But he did more than he was expected to do. This is a sign to show Mr. Yang had already put us emotionally within his social space.

Another example is connected with the hot water service we received. During the wintertime, from November to February, all of the family will set up a stove to keep the room warm by using coal as the fuel. Because it is to be kept on burning for 24 h, most families will also use it to boil hot water or cook meals to make the energy

¹⁸In China, a person’s ‘face’ (known as mianzi 面子) is built up by other’s comments and behaviours towards the person. Kwang Kuo-Hwang (1987) described mianzi as an ‘indigenous concept in Chinese culture’ (Kuo-Kwang: 947). Mianzi can directly impact on prestige and consequently have an influence on a person’s social network, which will also lead to favour. If a person is always diu mianzi (loses face), others might not want to approach him or her.
efficiently used. As for my mother and me, we didn’t have any knowledge about 
how to manage the coal stove, we were a bit worried about carbon monoxide poi-
soning, so we decided to use the electric heater. So when the winter was coming, 
most families were beginning to set up stoves by this time; however, my mother and 
I started to use an electric heater. When we had dinner with Mr. Yang and Jun Shu 
together, we talked about how to keep warm in the winter. When they got to know 
we were using an electric heater, Jun Shu\textsuperscript{19} said to us: ‘Since you have been using 
the electric heater, I will bring you hot water every day from now on, so you can 
save money. Electricity bills are not cheap here’. Jun Shu, together with his family, 
dwells in another courtyard beside us. At the time I moved in, I saw him standing in 
Hutong with longer hair, which is not a normal hairstyle among men. At that time I 
was thinking maybe he is an artist. Later, when we became familiar with each other, 
and I mentioned my first impression of him, he could not help laughing and said: ‘I 
am now jobless. But if you broaden the definition of art, and count cooking as a part 
of it, then I am doing something related with art. I cook my wife and daughter three 
meals every day’. His daughter, Yaoyao, was my student, and I helped her with her 
English learning. She didn’t do very well in her English studies at school. Because 
Yaoyao told me that she felt her teacher was rubbish and sometimes gave her stu-
dents wrong information, which only at the end of the class she realised was wrong. 
Being her English teacher made her family become also very close to us. Jun Shu’s 
family was also very close to Mr. Yang before we moved in, as Jun Shu and 
Mr. Yang used to work in the same company. Right after Jun Shu expressed his 
williness to bring us hot water every day, Mr. Yang said: ‘That should be no problem 
at all to me either. We two families will be your hot water supply source. I cannot 
guarantee any other things, but for the hot water, we can supply you as much as you 
need’. Hearing that, my mother and I felt really warm inside our hearts. 

After they set up their stove, they amazingly brought us hot water twice every 
day throughout the whole winter. This also became a link between our three fami-
lies. In the morning, Mr. Yang got up very early around 5.30 a.m., but we couldn’t 
be as early as he was. He told us later: ‘Your curtain is a sign to me: when I see your 
curtain is open from outside, I know you must be up already, and I will put the kettle 
onto the stove to warm up the water for you’. Sometimes, Mr. Yang and Jun Shu 
brought hot water to us at the same time, and we did not have enough containers to 
hold it all, so one of them had to take the water back. Sometimes they met each other 
on their way bringing the water to us. One of them would urge the other to take the 
water back and said: ‘I will give it. You can save it for yourself’. On some occa-
sions, we went outside, and they brought hot water to us, without knowing whether 
we were at home or not, so they had to stand outside for a long time knocking at the 
door. This happened to Jun Shu quite often, because he lived in the courtyard in

\textsuperscript{19}Jun shu is the name I call him. His name is Li Chengjun. Other neighbours all call him Xiaojun 
as a nickname, therefore my mother followed. Mr. Yang’s son, who is in the same generation as me, 
calls him Jun Shu, so I followed his way. Jun is his given name, shu means uncle. Here we do not 
use family name followed by the title ‘uncle’. Because Li Chengjun is much younger than Mr. 
Yang, everyone just calls him by his name. Therefore, Jun is like a label of him and that is why we 
called him Jun Shu.
front of ours and it was less easy for him or his wife to know whether we were in or not. Therefore, later on when we had a dinner gathering, he ‘complained’ to us about it: ‘I knocked on your door for a very long time, but no one replied to me. What’s the problem with you? (spoken with a cheeky smile )’. My mother said: ‘Sorry, we must have been out at that time. If we were in, how would we dare to refuse the warm sender coming in’. The term ‘warm sender’ is the name my mother and I gave to those who bring us hot water, because we feel their warm heart is a big contrast with the extremely cold weather.

‘Ok, let me continue’, Jun Shu said, ‘As there was no response, I went back upset, and after a while, I let Sun Hong come to knock on your door again, still silent as before. So we came back and forth with a broken heart’ (putting his hand on his chest). We all could not help laughing after hearing this.

‘I hereby formally apologise for what happened to you’, I replied, ‘Please accept my apology and this is my way to say sorry’ (picking up a chunk of meat with chopsticks I put this into his bowl). This action made the situation even more funny.

Seeing I stood up, Jun Shu stood up too, and now told me: ‘Sit down Qingqing. Listen to me, you do not owe me any apology. I just want to let you know that I treat you as my daughter, my relative. You dedicated almost all your free time to help with my daughter’s English. Your great kindness is as weighty as a mountain. I will not forget this great help for the rest of my life. So never say thank you or sorry to me from now on’.

Through the process of giving and benefits, the social space, although intangible, can be seen in this example to be something that is built up and that influences everyone concerned in a visible way. What Mr. Yang and Jun Shu tried to do was to pull me from the edge to the near centre of their social relation ripples. By doing this, they could also push themselves from the edge of my social ripples to the centre. This is also the reason I was trying to help Jun Shu daughter with her English study. We believe that we could both benefit from placing each other in the centre of our relation ripples by mutual caring. People’s social networks with their friends can be seen to be another kind of outcome from their relations to the physical space they regard as home.

2.4 Emotional Integration with the Social Network

At 11 o’clock in the morning, my next-door neighbour Mr. Yang went back from Zaoshi (morning market), which is an outdoor market that sells everything for daily needs. The major reasons for this market’s rising popularity, so that almost every residential area has at least one morning market within walking distance, are that firstly the fruit or vegetables they sell are fresh, and secondly the price is relatively low. The sellers are the peasants living in the outskirts of Beijing who have their own farmland or orchard. Every morning they bring these freshly picked fruits or vegetables and take them to their spot at morning market with their tractor.

\[20\] Sun Hong is Jun Shu wife.
Customers find these goods are much nicer than those they bought from other markets. Also, almost all the products are sourced locally; therefore, the ‘producer to consumer’ mode guarantees the cheap price. As Zaoshi (morning market) has become a must-go place for more and more housewives, other vendors or shops have also come into Zaoshi (morning market), for example, butcher shops, clothes shops, toy shops, shoes repair, etc., to meet multiple needs. Normally the Zaoshi (morning market) runs from 6 a.m. to 12.30 p.m., so only those who do not need to go to work in the day time can go there to shop. That is why I was surprised when I saw Mr. Yang coming back with four plastic bags of fresh goods in his hand, because I assumed he should be at work at that time. Actually, he used to work in a heavy manufacturing industrial factory as a fitter, which was seen as a very good job at that time, because it is a skillful job. And the worker’s social status was relatively high during Maoist time when the heavy industry was highly encouraged and supported by the government. Physical workers were seen as ‘elder brothers’. But after reforms in 1979, the state-owned enterprises became bankrupt, due to out-of-date technology, poor managing ability and corruption. This situation became worse in the 1990s. Mr. Yang was laid off at that time. Later on, he found a job in a bar and worked there as a security guard for about a year. After the bar closed down, he came back home and became a full-time househusband. The major income of his family started coming from his wife who was working as an accountant and his son who was working in the bus company as a conductor. When I saw him parking his bicycle outside the yard, I went up to him and tried to help carrying his stuff.

‘Are you back from Zaoshi (morning market), Uncle Yang?’

‘Yes, I just came back from there. Have you had your breakfast, Qingqing? If you haven’t, I’ve got some Youtiao (油条, can be understood as fried fritter) and Doufu Nao (豆腐脑, soybean curd with gravy). I have a fixed place to buy Youtiao and Doufu Nao, because that place sells the most delicious ones in this area’, Uncle Yang answered me.

I said, ‘Yes, I have already had breakfast. Thank you for asking’.

‘Really? Are you sure? You are very welcome to take some. No need to feel embarrassed. We all belong to Family Yang. Don’t think of yourself as an outsider’.

I said: ‘Thank you, Uncle Yang. What will you do today?’

‘My everyday life is in a regular routine: wake up at around 5.00 a.m., and then Liuwan for about one and a half hours, then I go to morning market to buy some food.

\[21\text{During and after the Cultural Revolution, the working class had been highly esteemed because their living relied on their own labour. That is why they were called elder brother.}\]

\[22\text{To ask someone if they have had their meal or not is a typical Chinese way of greeting and people get used to start their conversation by asking: ‘Have you eaten?’ But this question does not necessarily mean that the person who asked you wants to invite you for a meal. Even though, he or she said: ‘if you haven’t, would you like to have some with me?’ It is a Chinese modest way to say: ‘yes, I have already had’. Or ‘I have already prepared everything to cook the meal’. Or ‘I have already cooked a lot’. This is similar to British way of greeting, which is talking about weather when two people meet each other. But this does not necessarily mean the person asked you want to do something together with you in this weather.}\]

\[23\text{This means walk around in the morning before breakfast or in the evening after meal.}\]
After that, I come back to have a cup of tea and then take breakfast. At around 11.00 a.m., I start cooking lunch for me and my wife. After lunch, most Beijingers habitually take a noon nap, so do I. The afternoon is my personal leisure time; I can go and play chess, visit friends, talk to neighbours, do anything I want. My wife normally finishes her work at 5.00 p.m., so I need to get the dinner ready for her. But my son usually gets off his work very late at around 8.30 pm. He is a bus ticket seller. He continued telling me, ‘I have a very good chess partner, who is just living around the corner. He is also an indigenous Beijinger and knows a lot of Beijing folks. I am sure you will meet him very soon, because he always comes to me and forces me to play chess with him, even when I have other things I’m busy with. Next time if he comes to meet me, I will introduce him to you. He is tall with nearsighted glasses. I sometimes play chess with him during my leisure time in the afternoon’. Mr. Yang seemed really proud of knowing someone else who is also an indigenous Beijinger like himself, because he felt that he knows someone who might be helpful to my research.

‘Also I like wrestling which is one of my other favourite sports not only for watching but also to participate in. Other sports like football or basketball, I like to watch but I don’t play. A guy whose family name is Shan, who is younger than me, followed me and called me his wrestling teacher. Because he found I was more interesting and helpful than his teacher to learn from, so he dropped out and started to learn from me. He comes to meet me very often. So we can do some wrestling tutorials on the grass. After practising we cook and have a meal together. Because we both like alcohol and wrestling; only when you drink with someone who has the same hobbies as you will both sides feel they have more words to say to each other. I am sure you know the Chinese saying, “Jiu Feng Zhi Ji Qian Bei Shao (酒逢知己千杯少)”24. He used to live and work at around Jian Guo Men.25 But now he has moved to a new apartment at Tiantongyuan’.

I said, ‘That’s nice! Who else do you meet up with often?’

‘Well, I used to stay with my parents in this house, but they both passed away in recent years. But my wife’s parents who are now aged need some help from me, so I visit them every weekend to help them with washing clothes, cleaning the house, paying bills and so on. Sometimes, I even need to accompany them to see a doctor. As you know my wife is working every day, so it is my responsibility to take care of my father-in-law’, said Mr. Yang.

‘Yes, I can completely understand you’, I replied, ‘Where do they live? Is it near here?’

Mr. Yang said, ‘Yes, they live at Wangfujing (王府井), not far from here. I normally go there by bicycle, which takes no more than 20 minutes. My father has a younger brother, and I go to visit him on special occasions, like Chinese Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Day, on behalf of my aged father, though my father has passed away, but I still go to visit my uncle. He is living at Niu Street (牛街). My elder sister sometimes

24 This proverb means ‘A thousands glasses of wine are not too much if you drink with your bosom friend’.

25 Jianguomen is located on the southeast of second traffic ring, just 15 minutes from my fieldwork site by bicycle.
comes to visit me, because I used to stay with our parents to take care of them. At that
time my sister came to visit us very often, brought us some half-cooked food, took my
parents to the hospital or helped us to clean the house. Even after my parents both
passed away, they still come and visit me if she is available’, Mr. Yang told me.

‘Is she the lady who came here to visit you when you were out, so she left the
meat she brought for you to us?’ I asked.

‘Yes, that is her. Because my son loves meat, and her Danwei dispenses her a lot.
So she brought us some to share. She is a teacher at Huiwen Middle school, just
5 minutes walk from here. She lives around Hongqiao Pearl Market’.

‘That is also quite near here. Do you go to visit her?’

Mr. Yang said: ‘Very often, especially after my parents died, I have more free
time, so I can go and visit her any time’.

In sum, if I have figured out Mr. Yang’s social network area correctly, it will be
as in the map below. No matter how physically far they are from Mr. Yang’s place,
these people are nevertheless emotionally close to Mr. Yang.

As is shown on the map, Mr. Yang’s major social contacts dwell inside Beijing’s
second urban ring, besides his student Shan, who is far away from the centre and
outside the fifth ring. But the hotel Shan works for is right on second ring, and he
used to live around there.

The above map is a zoomed-in image of Mr. Yang’s inner city contacts.
2.5 What the City Is and Will Be

In 2004, the Beijing government issued *Beijing City Planning 2004–2010*. In this planning guide, they explained the Guidelines for the Building-up and Development of the City for 2004–2020. In this guide, Beijing is defined as: ‘The capital of People’s Republic of China, the centre of politics and culture, as well as an ancient historic capital and a modern city’.

Generally, the city planning committee oversees that the City of Beijing is ‘built towards a trend that integrates the traditional look with the modern city. The cultural and historic spirituality should be preserved strictly in the inner part (means inner city here)’.

Chongwen District, where I conducted the first half of my fieldwork, is described as ‘centre of physical exercise (PE), business, historic tourism and entertainment’. The reason they define Chongwen District as PE centre is because it is the location of General Administration of Sports of China; therefore, it has lots of playgrounds and sports shops. Furthermore the hospital offers the best injury therapy in the district. In 2009, the Qianmen business street was rebuilt and introduced many Western stores, for example, Zara, H&M, Swatch, Nike, New Balance, Citizen, McDonalds, KFC or Häagen-Dazs. Originally, the major stores along this street were all traditional and historical stores, for example, Wangmazi (王麻子), Wuyutai Tea Shop (吴裕泰), Donglaishun (东来顺) and Tianfuhao (天福号), and all of them are local Beijing brands.

To see how the government would like the city to be in the coming future, the Beijing City Planning also gives a clue. Concerning the rebuilding of the inner city, the guidelines indicate: ‘We should further strengthen the protection of the inner city, and formulate the protection planning. We should put more effort into planning the inner city, and take as our main task the preservation of the traditional special patterns and features of the inner city’. It also includes these clauses:

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27 During the time I stayed in the Hutong, the inner city of Beijing was composed of four districts, which are West District, East District located on the upper half, while Chongwen District and Xuanwu District resident are in the lower half. On 1 July 2010, Chongwen and Xuanwu were integrated with East District and West District accordingly. In this way, the inner city of Beijing includes only East District and West District.


29 The most famous scissors brand throughout China. Their technology of making scissors has become inherent cultural heritage of China. First founded in 1675 during the Qing Dynasty.

30 This teashop has been running since 1887 and registered as a company in 1997. Now Wuyutai is the leading teashop in China.

31 This is a restaurant of Beijing hotpot. This Islamic restaurant was set up in 1905 and developed over more than a hundred years.

32 This shop is famous for selling ready-cooked meat. It was set up 270 years ago.
‘(5) Preserving the traditional skeleton of the chessboard-shaped roads, and the layout of the original streets and Hutong; (6) Keeping the traditional architecture pattern which is “Hutong—courtyards”; (7) Strictly limiting the height of buildings according to area location to keep the special status as open and wide as before; (8) Protecting the major landscape line and scenic focal point of the street. Architectures with landscape and scenic focal points should strictly follow the city plan’s instructions on the buildings, including height, volume, and pattern. Strictly prohibit the building-up of architectures which are in disharmony with the protected style; (9) Preserving the characteristic colours and patterns of the buildings in the inner city. Maintain the style of gray residential places in contrast with the royal palace with golden tiles and red walls’.33

The above document clauses show how the government wants to positively protect the traditional architecture and the historic style of the inner city. However, the following indicates how the government wants to deal with the original residents who have been living in the inner city for many generations:

‘We should actively relocate the residents in the inner city. We should also take all the factors into consideration like, demographic structure, the improvement and sustainment of social net-works, boosting the quality of life of the dwellers in the inner city’.34

According to the plan, residents dwelling in inner city will be relocated elsewhere, which means they will be separated from the physical spaces, the ‘soil’, linked with their memory, and they will break the social networks they have built up. But what really makes residents tremble is the government’s misunderstanding of the concept of the ‘traditional city’. According to the clause, this term doesn’t refer to the residents inside it, for whom the city formulates their sense of abstract and social space, rather the government document refers to the architecture style and buildings alone.

2.6 Bricks and Stones or Mentality and Emotion?

From the regulation above we can clearly see that the government would like to preserve the traditional and historic look of the architecture form of the inner city in Beijing, as a way of keeping Beijing a typical ancient-looking inner city. Apparently, according to the clauses above, what they will do to achieve this is to keep or refurbish the buildings, roads and houses, and during this process residents inside it will be expelled. What the local residents in the inner city have been forced to dump is their soiled feature which they received from their forefathers, the physical need of Diqi to maintain the balance of their inside body they are used to, and the intimacy they took years to build up and develop, which is structured in a differentiated mode.

So there is a contradiction there. The inhabitants within this physical area, who appreciate and adapt themselves to life patterns within this special physical space, have integrated their life with the physical and social surroundings since their childhood and care more about relationships built within this living area. And this relationship can be seen in terms of abstract space and social space. The officials pay more attention to the physical space alone, which might result in separating the soul of that space—the people—from the physical architecture. Even though it is difficult to prove and demonstrate that the real spirit of the ancient-looking inner city is its people, and only those deeply involved in local people’s everyday life will realise and appreciate the value of the abstract and social space to them, this is the best guarantee of maintaining an ancient and historic city as it should be carefully preserved and protected.

Lefebvre contributed here by providing a good perspective to look at space: space is not just about the physical, but also integrated with mentality and emotion. Once a space has been destroyed, it is not merely a matter of these bricks and stones; instead, tearing apart the dwellers and their dwelling spot has a great impact on the inhabitants’ physical and emotional needs.

In the following chapter, I will provide more details about the life within Hutong and show the readers a contextual picture of Hutong space.

References


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